

VZCZCXRO4407  
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHIHL RUEHKUK  
DE RUEHDM #0719/01 2801320  
ZNY SSSSS ZZH  
O 071320Z OCT 09  
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6903  
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0729  
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 0841  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0688  
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 0970  
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0118  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0720  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 DAMASCUS 000719

NOFORN  
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO/MCDERMOTT  
PARIS FOR NOBLES  
LONDON FOR LORD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/06/2029  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: AVENGING AFLAQ (II): USING SYRIAN-IRAQ FLAP TO  
ADDRESS FORMER REGIME ELEMENTS AND FOREIGN FIGHTERS

REF: A. DAMASCUS 709  
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 695  
[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 697  
[1](#)D. OCTOBER 1 NEA/ELA-EMBASSY DAMASCUS EMAILS

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Summary: The lack of convincing evidence to substantiate Iraqi claims of former regime element (FRE) involvement in the August 19 attacks in Baghdad should not obviate U.S. concerns regarding the Syrian Government's role in supporting actors responsible for past and current violence in Iraq. Comforted by the cold international reaction to PM Maliki's call for an international tribunal to investigate the attacks, Asad appears content to hold on to the FRE card to see whether PM Maliki loses the his job in 2010 election. At least for now, Syrian officials seem to believe their continuing relationship with the Iraqi Baathists will not exclude future economic cooperation and energy sector deals with Iraq that would potentially net the Syrian economy billions. We should use any upcoming discussions with Syria to stress future Iraqi governments will also have concerns about FRES and foreign fighters in Syria. Syria's stated desire for better relations with Iraq and for political reconciliation among Iraqi political elements would be more credible if Damascus indicated a willingness now to address foreign fighters and used its influence to convince FRES and other exiled Iraqis in Syria to renounce violence and recognize the Iraqi Government's authority and legitimacy. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (S/NF) The ongoing dispute between Iraq and Syria over the role of former Iraqi Baath officials in Syria has generated interest in their current activities. This cable provides an assessment of Syria's motives for continuing to provide safe-haven for former Iraqi regime elements. It should be read with Ref A, which discusses Syrian ties to three prominent Iraqi Baath Party members in Damascus.

-----  
The Ghost of Michel Aflaq  
-----

13. (S/NF) Since the creation of the Baath Party in Syria by Michel Aflaq and the subsequent rise of the Iraqi Baath Party, Iraq and Syria have struggled for ideological and political supremacy as the true representative of Baath doctrine. Part of that struggle has involved sheltering of party operatives considered hostile by the other, including Aflaq himself, who received exile in Iraq until he moved to Paris for medical treatment and died in 1989. Many Syrians view Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's demand on Syria to return several former Iraqi official against this backdrop. The current context for that dispute, however, contains a new element -- the democratically elected Shi'a majority government in Baghdad that came to power in 2005.

14. (S/NF) Like many countries in the Arab world, Syria has adjusted slowly to this new reality. In 2003, Syria openly encouraged former regime elements (FREs) to support the anti-American insurgency in Iraq (ref A). As bilateral Iraqi-Syrian relations improved and PM Maliki consolidated his position after 2006, Syria tightened control of Iraqi Baath Party leaders, and, reportedly, in mid-2009 made clear to Iraq that one former Iraqi official, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, was no longer welcome in the country. At the same time, SARG officials refused to heed Iraqi calls to turn over former officials wanted by Baghdad for criminal offenses and alleged support of terrorist attacks.

15. (S/NF) During his most recent meeting with Asad on August 18 in Damascus, Maliki reportedly sought to strike a deal that would directly address this irritant in bilateral

DAMASCUS 00000719 002 OF 005

relations. Maliki conveyed directly to Asad his willingness to advance a series of oil and gas deals and take steps to increase bilateral trade that could, over the next decade, net the Syrian economy billions of dollars and generate thousands of jobs, according to Mahdi Sajjad (strictly protect), a UK/Iraqi citizen who works as the General Manager of Gulf Sands Oil operations in Syria and maintains high-level contacts in Baghdad and Damascus. In return, Maliki sought Asad's agreement to return several named former Iraqi officials wanted on criminal charges and believed to be supporting violence in Iraq.

16. (S/NF) According to accounts provided by Sajjad and Syrian Vice Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad (ref B), Asad pointedly refused, defending the FREs as "political opposition." He also demanded proof to substantiate Maliki's allegations. According to Sajjad, the exchange continued through an official lunch hosted by Asad, during which the Syrian President compared the FREs to Maliki himself. "We didn't turn you over when Saddam was willing to pay any price," Asad reportedly said. Asad defended the right of pro-resistance al-Rai television, operated by former Iraqi MP Mishan Juburi, on grounds of freedom of expression. In the end, Miqdad reported, Asad agreed to consider any solid proof the Iraqis might provide to support their allegations that former Iraqi regime elements were supporting or fomenting violence. Asad's response, motivated by a variety of domestic and regional factors, indicates how seriously the Syrian government views its relations with former Iraqi Baath officials, even if it means potentially forgoing a lucrative economic relationship that could significantly boost Syria's economic output.

-----  
Assessing Motives for Syrian Behavior  
-----

17. (S/NF) Syria's Vision for Iraq: Many Syrians appear genuinely to believe that rehabilitation and reintegration of former Iraqi Baathists, most of whom are Sunni, into Iraqi politics will balance Shia influence and help the central government maintain control over the breakaway tendencies of Iraqi Kurds and Shia. Syrian officials also potentially see

themselves as brokers who could benefit politically and economically from helping their friends return to power in Iraq. According to International Crisis Group Representative Peter Harling (strictly protect), some Syrian officials, such as GID Chief Ali Mamluk, tend to have an inflated sense of the influence al-Ahmed or al-Douri might yield, but there are others, such as Vice President Shara's National Security Advisor Mohammed Nasif Khayrback, who argue Syria's interests require better ties to all of Iraq's political movements, especially mainstream Shia parties. Despite these differences, most Syrians appear to agree -- correctly, in Harling's view -- that de-Baathification measures created a large incentive to resist U.S. reconstruction efforts and require concrete steps by the government to integrate all Iraqi actors into the political mainstream. Syria's sympathetic stance toward the former Iraqi officials puts it at odds not just with Baghdad, but also with Tehran. "Syrian officials are now talking about Iran's efforts to heighten Iraqi concerns by warning of a return of the Baath Party," says Harling.

18. (S/NF) Avoiding Concessions Under Duress: Another reason behind Syria's refusal to part company with the FRES is concern about the kind of signal such an action would send to other "political" exiles in Syria, such as Hamas. Under severe duress caused by the threat of a 1998 Turkish invasion, Syria ended its relationship with former PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan; since then, the Syrian Government has strongly resisted efforts to compel it to sever relations with political exile groups in the country. Part of this

DAMASCUS 00000719 003 OF 005

resistance stems from a desire to inspire loyalty from the exile groups themselves, according to Al-Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamidi (strictly protect), who argues that Syria's regional influence depends to a great degree on these relations. At the same time, the government's domestic credibility is also a factor. "Simply turning over these Iraqis to face trial and possible execution would raise questions from the Syrian public about the Syrian commitment to encouraging a Sunni role in the Iraqi government," argues Hamidi. Such questions arose in 2005, for instance, when Syria's cooperation in the reported rendition of an Iraqi official leaked to the public, Ibrahim observes.

19. (S/NF) Arab Opinion on Syria's Side: Syrian officials also appear to believe that international and Arab opinion, while not exactly supporting Syria's position, remains ambivalent, if not hostile, to PM Maliki. Hassan al-Nouri, a U.S.-educated former minister and director of Syria's most prominent private business school, suggests that the Maliki-led government enjoys few friends in the region. By contrast, Turkey, Kuwait, and even Jordan appear to lean towards Syria's side in the ongoing dispute, mainly because "Iraq can't provide any credible evidence to substantiate its claims (against Syria)." Countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which are far from friendly to Syria, appear closer to Syria's position because they suspect Iraqi politicians of being pawns of the Iranians, argues al-Nouri. In fact, we understand that that Saudi King Abdullah and President Asad discussed Iraq during their surprise meeting at the September 23 inauguration of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) outside of Jeddah (Ref C) and they plan to discuss it during the King's announced October 7-8 visit to Damascus.

110. (S/NF) PM Maliki's Political Star Dimming: Another factor is a prevailing sense in Syria that PM Maliki's political standing may be waning, according to Harling and Reuters Bureau Chief Khalid Oweiss. Mohammed Nasif Khayrbeck reportedly assesses Maliki to be increasingly isolated by other Shia parties and losing public support after failing to deliver enhanced security as American troops prepared to withdraw. Other Syrian analysts may dispute this assessment, suggests Orient Center Director Samir al-Taqi, but they aren't being heard. At the end of the day, says al-Taqi, the

Syrian Government is willing to wait until the (January 2010) elections. Even if Maliki returns to power, the face of the government is likely to change, observes al-Taqi. "Until then, Syria will do what it does best," i.e., wait.

¶11. (S/NF) Neutral U.S. Reaction: Local observers note that Syrian officials also view the U.S. position on the ongoing Iraqi-Syrian spat in a positive light. French and other diplomats tell us they are hearing from senior MFA contacts positive remarks regarding the U.S. emphasis on dialogue as the best means to resolve this dispute. Other Syrian sources suggest the U.S. should be doing more to advise the Iraqis to avoid confrontational accusations and remarks in the media as a way of easing tensions and finding a way forward. "This is what the Turks are telling the Syrians and Iraqis, but PM Maliki has stubbornly insisted on referring this matter to the UN even though there is little support," reports Hamidi. Indeed, V/M Miqdad said as much to us and reiterated Syria's support for the U.S. position during his September 29-30 meetings in Washington (refs B and D).

-----  
Factoring Iraqi Security Issues Into U.S.-Syrian Engagement  
-----

¶12. (S/NF) In recent years, U.S. re-engagement of Syria has sought to avoid mixing Syrian support of foreign fighter facilitators and the Syrian Government's relationship with former Iraqi Baathist officials. Both issues, however, have

DAMASCUS 00000719 004 OF 005

become subsumed into a broader Iraqi-Syrian fray that shows no signs of easing. The fact that little evidence exists to substantiate Iraqi claims for FRE involvement in the August 19 attacks does not obviate U.S. concerns regarding the Syrian Government's role in supporting actors responsible for past and current violence in Iraq. How best to address these concerns, however, remains a challenge. Recent experience with U.S. efforts to advance a trilateral U.S.-Syrian-Iraqi dialogue on security issues faltered at least in part because of Iraqi sensitivities to the perception of U.S. infringement into internal Iraqi affairs. Now any U.S. engagement of Syria raises potential concerns in Baghdad that we may be advancing U.S.-Syrian bilateral relations at the expense of Iraqi interests.

¶13. (S/NF) This situation suits Syria's position, at least on a tactical level. Damascus can deflect Iraqi accusations regarding FRE involvement in the August 19 attacks while advertising positive steps Syria has taken to counter the inflow of foreign fighters. Syria also comes out looking reasonable to Turkey, France, the UK, and others by expressing a willingness to meet Iraqi officials under Turkish auspices and by committing to take action when and if it ever receives credible evidence of FRE involvement in the August 19 attacks.

¶14. (S/NF) In defense of Syria's position, SARG officials are now making patently false claims that, if challenged, could expose contradictions between Syria's stated intentions and its actual behavior. To take a few examples:

-- V/FM Miqdad told us here and officials in Washington that Syria and Iraq face "common enemies," and Syria remained 100 percent committed to combatting violence. This claim contradicts a large body of reporting in State and other channels. Without directly calling Syrian credibility into question, U.S. officials might ask how Syrian officials would react if they had information that the Syrian Government itself was supporting foreign fighters.

-- Miqdad also said Syria was supporting "political opposition," not "Saddamists." According to information available on the Internet, two Syria-based former Iraqi officials -- Mishan Jaburi and Mohamad Yunis al-Ahmad -- may have openly questioned Saddam's governing practices, but both

men (Jaburi in particular) openly challenge the legitimacy of the current Iraqi constitution and government.

-- Miqdad again: If Syria receives credible evidence, we will act. Response: We are reassured to hear your commitment. How would you respond to the view of some in Washington who claim the SARG ignored information regarding four named foreign fighters handed to FM Muallim by U.S. officials on May 7?

¶15. (S/NF) From Embassy Damascus's perspective, the goal should be to move the Iraqi-Syrian discussion beyond the narrow parameters of the August 19 attacks to Syria's role in supporting violence in Iraq over the last five years, including Syrian support of foreign fighters. Previewing our thoughts on how to achieve this objective with the Iraqi government might reassure PM Maliki about the purpose of our efforts to engage Syria. At the same time, such a conversation with the Iraqis might also offer a chance to reemphasize the U.S. desire to see further steps to establish a framework that might facilitate rehabilitation and reintegration of former Baath officials who have renounced violence and have no pending criminal charges against them, if only to undercut Syrian and Arab claims that Baghdad has limited tolerance for Sunni minority participation in Iraqi political life.

¶16. (S/NF) With the Syrians, we should seek to reinforce

DAMASCUS 00000719 005 OF 005

points made by U.S. officials during V/FM Miqdad's September 29-30 trip to Washington, with an emphasis on the political realities that limit U.S. ability to engage Syria absent additional positive Syrian actions to enhance Iraqi security.

It seems clear that Asad has written off the prospect of repairing relations with PM Maliki and is waiting for the January 2010 elections. One point we might stress is that, regardless of who wins the elections, the issues of FRES and foreign fighters are likely to come up again. Syria's interest in better relations with future Iraqi governments should lead it to refrain from using the FRES as a way to express its unhappiness with PM Maliki.

¶17. (S/NF) We might also stress that Syria could pave the way for better relations with future Iraqi regimes by prevailing on FRES in Syria to moderate their message and behavior. We are hearing unconfirmed reports that a group of some 40 Iraqis gathered last week at the home of al-Rai TV station operator Mishan Jaburi to express a desire to participate in Iraqi politics. Were Syrian officials to urge the Iraqi participants at such meetings to recognize the legitimacy of the Iraqi constitution and authority of the Iraqi government and renounce violence, Syria's claim to wanting reconciliation would be far more credible. A willingness to address Jihadi networks transiting Syria to attack targets in Iraq would similarly add weight to Syria's stated desire for better relations with Iraq and the U.S.

HUNTER